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By Michael Coleman

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WASHINGTON — New Mexico's all-Democratic congressional delegation said President Obama's speech Wednesday succinctly specified his plans to overhaul health care, debunked inaccurate criticisms of his proposal and set Congress up to approve a bill and send it to his desk in the weeks ahead.

"I thought he did an excellent job of answering critics and laying out the basic proposal that he is urging Congress to move ahead on," said Sen. Jeff Bingaman, New Mexico's senior senator and a member of the so-called Gang of Six working to craft a bipartisan health care plan in the Senate.

In an interview with the Journal, Bingaman added that Obama's proposals Wednesday night — including new insurance protections for consumers and requirements that most Americans obtain insurance or face financial penalty — was "very consistent" with legislation the Gang of Six expects to produce by next week.

"I didn't see any major surprises," Bingaman said.

Sen. Tom Udall said Obama used the presidential bully pulpit not only to rebut falsehoods about his plan, but also to answer critics — including those in Congress — who have complained about a lack of specifics from the president. That should be helpful as the House and Senate get back to work trying to pass final legislation, Udall said.

"He made a passionate call for action," Udall said. "He really teed up the ball for us."

Udall also said he was pleased that Obama did not abandon his call for a public health care option, or government-run health insurance plan, as some speculated he might.

"I'm going to keep fighting for a public option, and I look forward to the details of his plan," Udall said.

Rep. Harry Teague, who represents conservative-leaning southern New Mexico, said Obama was smart to tackle myths about his health care plan head-on. Obama chastised critics who contend that the government would have panels to hasten the death of elderly people, or that illegal immigrants would be insured under a public plan. The immigrant remarks prompted one Republican House member to shout "You lie!" Several members of the New Mexico delegation said the outburst was inappropriate.

"I had never heard that before," Udall said. "I was surprised and shocked."

Teague said he hopes Obama answered "fears" that his constituents have.

"In my district, there is a lot of fears about this, and I think he addressed those in good fashion," Teague said. "One of the problems we've had is not having a definitive direction to go in, and I

think he helped that tonight."

Teague said that he doesn't think a public option is necessary to overhaul the health care system, and that he has serious concerns about the plan's overall cost.

"As a small-business man, one of the concerns I'm going to have is how we're going to pay for it, and I'd like to see the details, and what effect that will have on the thousands of small businesses in New Mexico," Teague said.

Rep. Martin Heinrich said that after months of contentious debate, he suspects Obama's speech might prove to be the kick-start Congress needed to finish a bill.

"I think when we look back on this in decades to come, this day will be the tipping point that health care reform needed," Heinrich said. "He articulates the pieces that are broken in the current system better than anyone else and how to move forward without throwing away the pieces that work."

Rep. Ben Ray Lujan said the president met high expectations for his speech and effectively countered critics.

"I think it was important that the president stood up and said very clearly what he thought was needed for the plan," Lujan said. "He also stood up to the misconceptions, the myths and the flat-out lies that are being spread."